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ABSTRACT

Because family involvement is a potentially powerful element of effective literacy instruction, the International Reading Association (IRA) believes parents, family and community members, teachers, school administrators, researchers, and policymakers must be aware of its importance and must receive information and training that allows them to effectively execute their respective roles in establishing family involvement in literacy learning. This position paper considers the effectiveness of family involvement programs and the essential nature of teacher preparation and professional development. The paper then poses and addresses a number of school-level questions and classroom-level questions about parent or family involvement. Noting that an outcomes-based approach to educator preparation reflects what is known about the interconnected roles of the school, family, and community in children's learning and development, the paper makes several relevant recommendations for teacher educators, teachers, and school administrators. (Contains 20 references and lists related resources.) (NKA)

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Family-School Partnerships:

Essential Elements of Literacy Instruction in the United States

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A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

Despite widespread endorsement of family-school partnerships to support student learning, most educators in the United States have received little or no training in working effectively with families. Surveys of teacher educators, teachers, and administrators (Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994), evaluations of current professional education programs (Powell, 1991), and content analysis of state certification tests (Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan, 1994) all support the conclusion that programs for prospective teachers neither provide student teachers with information about and supervised experiences in working with families, nor expect them to demonstrate relevant competencies and skills for certification.

Because family involvement is a potentially powerful element of effective literacy instruction, the International Reading Association believes parents, family and community members, teachers, school administrators, researchers, and policymakers must be aware of its importance and must receive information and training that allows them to effectively execute their respective roles in establishing family involvement in literacy learning. Teachers and school personnel especially must receive appropriate training.

Family involvement programs are effective.

There is extensive evidence that family involvement in the education of children is critical to effective schooling. Research such as that reviewed by Swap (1993,) Henderson (1981, 1987), and Henderson and Berla (1994) shows that family involvement improves student achievement, attitudes toward learning, and self-esteem. Schools that undertake and support strong comprehensive family involvement efforts and have strong linkages with the communities they serve are more likely to produce students who perform better than identical schools that do not involve families. Children from low-income and culturally and racially diverse families experience greater success when schools involve families, enlist them as allies, and build on their strengths. Family involvement in a child's education is a more important factor in student success than family income or education.

Although it is important to have data about the particular kind of family involvement program being implemented, collaborative partnerships with parents have been shown to benefit families, schools, and teachers in addition to students. As a result of such partnerships, for example, families better understand the work of schools, have more confidence in schools, and often enroll in continuing education to advance their own learning. The teachers with whom parents work have higher opinions of such families and higher expectations for their students, which leads to increased achievement. Schools that work well with families have better teacher morale, higher ratings of teachers by parents, and better reputations and linkages to resources in the community (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Swap, 1993).

In addition, there is specific research related to positive effects of family involvement on literacy. For example, Morrow and Young (1997) attempted to bridge home and school literacy contexts by involving families in

literacy activities with their children. Results indicated a significant difference in favor of children involved in the family program. Bevans, Furnish, Ramsey, and Talsma (2001) also focused on literacy development and found that the parent involvement intervention led to an increase in at-home reading, as well as improvement in home-school communication and an increase in parents' knowledge about reading. Both children's and parents' attitudes toward reading improved. Paratore, Melzi, and Krol-Sinclair (1999) found similar positive effects in a study that focused on Latino children and their families' involvement in a literacy project. Leslie and Allen (1999) found that parent involvement in recreational reading was a predictor of children's reading growth.

Family literacy programs also support the notion that parent involvement is a powerful component of effective literacy programs. Padak and Rasinski (1997) reviewed the literature related to family literacy and found that children, parents, families as units, and the larger society all benefited from family literacy programs.

Teacher preparation and professional development are essential.

No amount of programs to "bring the school to the community" and no amount of investment in supportive materials and equipment can bring about family-school partnerships if educators are not prepared to initiate and support those partnerships. Educators, parents, and other stakeholders need to be effectively prepared to carry out this broader range of collaborative roles. This position on family involvement is consistent with other Association positions that emphasize the central importance of well-prepared teachers to achieving desired outcomes.

Teacher preparation programs at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels must focus on broader definitions of family involvement and must view family involvement as a collaboration between educators and families. We believe that these partnerships should be established in preprimary school settings and enhanced throughout the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

There are no formulas for creating effective programs; rather, educators must be prepared to ask questions about the particular situation and build family-school partnerships based on the answers they receive. Some critical questions include, who are the family members and what roles should they assume? What kinds of involvement are advantageous for our school? What terms should be used to accurately portray the kind of balanced family involvement we want? Are there areas in which families have expressed interest or need to be involved? In addition, the classroom-level questions and school-level questions that follow will help as family-school partnerships develop.

School-level questions

Over the years, many schools and teachers have puzzled over questions such as:

- To represent the school's philosophy of parental involvement, should teachers and administrators formulate a singular definition or multiple definitions of parental involvement?
- Should schools develop specific policies about the roles parents may or should assume?

These kinds of questions are important for administrators, particularly because they set school policy. Principals and other school administrators might organize family nights or other types of events, but it is important that these officials have thought about deeper and broader definitions of parent involvement.

Further, schools have puzzled over a question raised by Berger (1983):

- Does the thought that parents could be involved as education policymakers in conjunction with the school interest or threaten you? (p. 1).

This question is crucial because school administrators can view more parent involvement as a blessing or a curse.

Still further, schools have puzzled over questions like those posed by Greenwood and Hickman (1991):

- What types of parent involvement have the strongest impact on different types of student achievement (e.g., higher order and lower order)?
- What types of parent involvement have the strongest effects on parent and student attitudes and behaviors?
- What parent and family characteristics influence student performance and parent involvement?
- What types of parent involvement work best with families of different socioeconomic status and ethnic backgrounds? (p. 287)

Classroom-level questions

In addition to the preceding school-level questions, many teachers have puzzled over questions that directly affect their individual practices of parent involvement:

- What should I do? How can I do more in my classroom to promote meaningful parent involvement?
- How should I reorganize my classroom instruction based on what I know about my students' home situations and their parents' abilities to help them?

• What do I need to know so I will not offend parents—particularly parents of minority students?
• How should I interact with parents who have an ideology of parent involvement that conflicts with my own expectations?
• Should I only expect the parents of my students to be involved in their education? When the parents of my students choose not to be involved, should I seek out other family or community members to serve as advocates for these children?
• Should I began to think about parent-involvement initiatives in terms of my students' social, emotional, physical, and academic environment? Based on the families of the children I teach, are my expectations for parent involvement unrealistic?
• How can I begin to rethink, in my classroom, the taken-for-granted, institutionally sanctioned means for teachers and parents to communicate (i.e., parent-teacher association meetings, open house rituals at the beginning of the school year, writing and telephoning parents, etc.)?

All the preceding school- and classroom-level questions relate to various stages in individual educators' thinking about family involvement, and these questions are an important part of the process of conceptualizing and understanding family involvement. Furthermore, these questions help teachers target the kinds of parent involvement they need in their particular classrooms (Edwards, 1999; Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999), and teachers can ask these questions to begin generating specific ideas of parent involvement. More important, these questions can and should be included as part of staff-development workshops to challenge teachers to reflect on a wide range of questions that need to be addressed when thinking about parent involvement initiatives. Answering these questions will help to foster in all relevant participants the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for successful collaboration among teachers, school staff, and families.

Activities to develop family-school partnerships also need to look different at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Not only do adolescents' needs and abilities differ from those of younger students, their relationships with family members and educators change as they mature. The failure to include older students in family-school activities may partially account for the dramatic decline in working partnerships as students move through the grades.

Educators need to view partnerships with families as an integral part of good teaching and student success. Family involvement in the education of children is in part an issue of access and equity. Children whose families know how to "navigate the system" and advocate effectively on their behalf tend to experience more success in their education than children whose families do not. However, most families need help learning how to be productively involved in their children's education at each grade level, especially at transition points between elementary, middle, and high school. School programs and educator practices to organize family-school connections are

equalizers to help families who would not become involved on their own (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). The benefits of developing collaborative relationships with all families are many, and they accrue to educators, families, and students.

Recommendations for teacher educators, teachers, and school administrators

An outcomes-based approach to educator preparation reflects what we know, as an Association, about the interconnected roles of the school, family, and community in children's learning and development; about the necessity for taking account of the values and attitudes of educators, students, and the community served; and about the need for educators to acquire knowledge about direct practice with families and communities. The underlying goal of this approach is to encourage the implementation of innovative, responsive, and flexible programs that can prepare educators for family-school partnerships in a changing world.

The International Reading Association believes that because family involvement is a potentially powerful element of effective literacy instruction, it is an essential component of any effort to promote literacy instruction. If schools are to implement partnerships with families and communities so that all students can succeed, the Association makes the following recommendations to teacher educators, classroom teachers, and school administrators:

- Be aware of the importance of family-school connections and be committed to the concept of partnerships with the families of all children.
- Be able to think systematically about your family involvement attitudes and practices and learn from your experiences.
- Understand the goals and benefits of different types of family involvement, as well as the barriers to their implementation.
- Be aware of the way cultural assumptions and life experiences influence interpretation of events, and respect the beliefs, values, opinions, lifestyles, and childrearing practices of all families.
- Be able to build on family diversity in the classroom, at the school site, and in the home.
- Be able to work collaboratively with each other, with other professionals, and with families and students to develop a common vision of partnership.
- Be willing to assume responsibility for initiating, supporting, rewarding and monitoring various types of partnership activities, ensuring access for all parents, and respecting all types and levels of participation.

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Related Resources From the International Reading Association

Books

Families at School: A Guide for Educators, by Adele Thomas, Lynn Fazio, & Betty L. Stiefelmeyer (1999)

Families at School: A Handbook for Parents, by Adele Thomas, Lynn Fazio, & Betty L. Stiefelmeyer (1999)

Family Literacy Connections in Schools and Communities, edited by Lesley Mandel Morrow (1995)

What Should We Expect of Family Literacy? Experiences of Latino Children Whose Parents Participate in an Intergenerational Literacy Project, by Jeanne R. Paratore, Gigliana Melzi, & Barbara Krol-Sinclair (1999)

Brochures

Family Literacy and the School Community: A Partnership for Lifelong Learning

What Is Family Literacy? Getting Involved in Your Child's Literacy Learning

Articles

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